

## Tragedy Into Grace: Lincoln At Gettysburg

SUSAN THOMAS

Transcript of the Gettysburg Address

Executive Mansion,  
Washington, 1863

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that 'all men are created equal'.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of it, as a final resting place for those who died here, that the nation might live. This we may, in all propriety do. But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow, this ground— The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have hallowed it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here; while it can never forget what they did here.

It is rather for us, the living, we here be dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that, from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here, gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve these dead shall not have died in vain; that the nation, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people by the people for the people, shall not perish from the earth.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Lincoln, 'Draft of the Gettysburg Address' (Available at <http://www.ourdocuments.gov> [Accessed 11 August 2007]).

And so were, in Gary Wills' estimation, the words that remade America. The speech is a landmark—immortal, heroic, but Abraham Lincoln could certainly be called an unlikely American hero. Perceptions of the man in his time are a far cry from the glorified historical depictions of The Great Emancipator. Rather than a military genius and America's greatest orator, Lincoln was considered awkward, inarticulate, and ultimately a rube, particularly by his political opponents. He had had fewer than two years of formal education, and had been a farmer, a shopkeeper and a businessman—failing miserably at all—before turning to politics. Despite his perceived shortcomings, Lincoln possessed a keen understanding of the human condition and an almost supernatural empathy for human suffering, perhaps due to his lifelong battle with debilitating depression, the mental instability of his wife Mary Todd, and his own personal losses.

The Roman rhetorician Quintilian believed that in order to convince an audience, a rhetor had to put himself in his audience's place and literally feel what it was feeling. So it is not surprising that the man who 'remade America' with his words, freed the slaves, and healed a war-torn nation's wounds drew his strength and wisdom from his own suffering, his own emotional captivity, and his own deep sense of loss. Fitting Quintilian's description of the good man skilled in speaking, Lincoln not only prefigured the course of a nation, but in so doing became a theoretical ancestor of the 'new' rhetoric, as he practiced transactional rhetoric as an *epistemic* art over 100 years before the category was invented.

### *The 'New' Rhetoric*

According to American rhetorical historian James Berlin, the most crucial events that ushered in the 'new rhetoric' between the years of 1950 and 1975 were the intensification of the Cold war and the economic, political and social forces that resulted in a dramatic increase in university enrolments.

A renewed interest in classical rhetoric as a discipline of profound historical importance and of considerable contemporary relevance arose in American English departments during the 1950s. The revival of Aristotelian humanism at the University of Chicago encouraged this renewed interest, born as part of the movement toward general education in response to the

Depression and WWII, when the masses were enrolling in higher education courses. In 1952, a *College English* article by Richard Weaver stressed the importance of invention over logic in argument—meaning the ‘discovery of content, of relevant supporting materials’—to assist the process of creation. It also stressed the Aristotelian notion of *topoi*, focusing on genus, consequence, similarity and authority.

Wayne C. Booth’s ‘The Revival of Rhetoric’, delivered at the Modern Language Association Conference in 1964 and published in 1965, was one of the most significant statements supporting the return of rhetoric to a place of prominence in higher education.<sup>2</sup> Booth would become an outspoken proponent of the ‘new’ rhetoric, and in *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric*, defines the discipline as:

the entire range of resources that human beings share for producing effects on one another: effects ethical (including everything about character), practical (including political), emotional (including aesthetic), and intellectual (including every academic field). It is the entire range of our use of ‘signs’ for communicating, effectively or sloppily, ethically or immorally. At its worst, it is our most harmful miseducator—except for violence. But at its best—when we learn to listen to the ‘other’, then listen to ourselves and thus manage to respond in a way that produces genuine dialogue—it is our primary resource for avoiding violence and building community.<sup>3</sup>

Booth’s redefinition of rhetoric as a theory for the times heralded the era of the ‘new’ rhetorics.

In 1965, Edward PJ Corbett published *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, offering a modern application of Aristotelian rhetoric and providing a history of rhetoric as a discipline. He describes the ‘new rhetoric’ as profiting by what it appropriated from the modern refinements in psychology, semantics, motivational research, and other behavioral sciences. The call for a ‘new’ rhetoric resulted in numerous theories and

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne C. Booth, ‘The Revival of Rhetoric’, *PMLA*, 80, pt. 2 (1965), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 152.

pedagogical approaches. Berlin identifies the three major branches of new rhetoric as Objective, Subjective, and Transactional.<sup>4</sup>

Based on positivistic epistemology, objective rhetoric arose from the influence of behaviorist psychology. It began with Douglas Porter's 1962 article 'The Behavioral Repertoire of Writing', which argued that the successful writing act should be analyzed in terms of its sequence of observable behavior, and students should be directed to engage in this sequence and be rewarded for successful performance. This directly relates to psychologist B. F. Skinner's behaviorist notions of conditioning—that rewarded behaviors would persist and punished behaviors would cease. This theory was eventually superseded, but the damaging effects, e.g., the notion of rhetoric separated from critical thinking, still linger.

The most pervasive form of subjective rhetoric was expressionistic, which had diverse approaches. The common epistemology held that reality is a personal and private construct; truth is always discovered within, through an internal glimpse, an examination of the private, inner world. According to Berlin, the material world is only a lifeless matter. The social world is even more suspect because it attempts to coerce individuals into engaging in thoughtless conformity. Solitary activity is always promising, group activity always dangerous.

The thought patterns of Transactional Rhetoric locate reality in the interaction of the rhetorical process itself—in the interaction of material reality, writer, audience and language—not in sensory impression or the quantifiable (objective) or within ideas and visions (expressionistic).

Transactional Rhetoric became the most popular branch of 'new' rhetoric. The differences between the various types of transactional rhetoric lie in the way each of these elements is defined, and more importantly, in the nature of their relationship. Berlin identifies three transactional rhetorics: classical, cognitive, and epistemic. He writes:

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<sup>4</sup> James A. Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), p. 139.

In the 1960s and 70s, classical rhetoric was distinguished by its commitment to rationality. Classical rhetoric as found in Aristotle treated all the elements of the rhetorical situation: interlocutor, audience, reality, and language. All are involved in the rhetorical act and must be considered in pedagogy. The elements are defined in rational terms since rhetoric regards reality and the mind of the interlocutor as inherently rational—operating according to the strictures of Aristotelian logic.<sup>5</sup>

The school of cognitive rhetoric is distinguished by its assertion that the mind is composed of a set of structures that develop in chronological sequence. Berlin writes:

The most important of these are the ones that deal with the relationship of language and thought. Its intellectual forbears are Jerome Bruner and Jean Piaget, so this theory is concerned with the language of process, seeing both learning and language as parts of development and of cognitive stages. Although this branch focuses on the psychology of the individual, it is still a transactional approach: the mind with reality, the mind with the minds of the audience, the mind with the structures of language.<sup>6</sup>

The epistemic branch, however, remains the most prominent, and characterizes contemporary approaches to rhetoric. According to Michael Leff, the distinguishing characteristic of the epistemic view is that rhetoric is a serious philosophical subject that involves not only the transmission, but also the generation of knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Leff writes:

Rhetoric exists not merely so that truth may be communicated, but that truth may be discovered; knowledge is not discovered by reason alone, cognitive and affective processes are not separate, intersubjectivity is a condition of all knowledge.

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*, p. 155.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*, p. 159.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*, p. 165.

Rhetoric is epistemic because knowledge itself is a rhetorical construct.<sup>8</sup>

Kenneth Burke's dramatic pentad and theories of 'man as a symbol using animal' had a considerable influence on the new rhetoric. Burke writes:

If I had to sum up in one word the difference between the 'old' rhetoric and a 'new' (a rhetoric re-invigorated by fresh insights which the 'new Science' contributed to the subject), I would reduce it to this: The key term for the old rhetoric was 'persuasion' and its stress was upon deliberate design. The key term for the new rhetoric would be 'identification', which can include a partially unconscious factor in appeal.<sup>9</sup>

Appeal is the essence of communication for Burke. When people use symbols to induce cooperation in other human beings, they must identify themselves with the audience or, in Burke's term, become *consubstantial* with them. Rhetoric becomes for Burke a study of the various modes of achieving identification. Structure of any kind is a method of identification. The way we structure or arrange our discourse, for instance, could be one of the ways in which we adjust our discourse to fit the needs of our audience. Style, too, can be a mode of identification, since it can be a conscious or an unconscious attempt on our part to suit our language to the level of the audience. Similarly, Chaïm Perelman, another major voice of new rhetoric, describes in *The Realm of Rhetoric* the ways a community united by discourse establishes its interpretive practices.<sup>10</sup>

### *Lincoln as Rhetorician*

And Lincoln certainly knew how to unite a community by discourse. While his political resume was meagre, the failed prairie lawyer from

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*, p. 165.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in 'Kenneth Burke', *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient Times to the Information Age*, eds. Theresa Enos and Stuart Brown (New York: Garland, 1996), p. 134.

<sup>10</sup> Chaïm Perelman, *The Realm of Rhetoric*, trans. William Kluback (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, c1982).

Springfield, Illinois would emerge to become, as Walt Whitman wrote 'the grandest figure yet, on all the crowded canvas of the Nineteenth Century'.<sup>11</sup> Lincoln wanted nothing more than to be remembered after his death, but believed almost until the end that his life had been one miserable failure. Haunted by premonitions of his own death and tortured by persistent thoughts of suicide, this unassuming man would rise to the occasion when his young nation most needed a saviour.

Lincoln biographer Doris Kearns Goodwin identifies eight emotional strengths that allowed Lincoln to overcome his lack of formal schooling and administrative experience to develop what we would call today a first-class emotional intelligence: empathy, humour, magnanimity, generosity of spirit, perspective, self-control, a sense of balance, and a social conscience.<sup>12</sup> Each of these qualities would come to bear on the Gettysburg Address and indeed all of Lincoln's actions, both public and private.

The period between 1820 and 1860 is commonly called the Golden Age of Oratory in America, as civic discourse was considered integral to conducting the affairs of the young nation. Individual speakers were often considered folk heroes, and audiences expected to be entertained and captivated by oratorical eloquence. Vacillating between its two modes, the playful and the rational, oratory was understood as an art that, on the one hand, entertained audiences and, on the other, settled political disputes. Inextricably linked with eloquence and at the same time founded upon the principles of good reason, oratory—whether practiced in congress or on the stump—was perceived to be America's alternative to violence in the struggle over the relationship between the powers and limits of individual states and the federal government. Lincoln's 'Gettysburg Address' is perhaps the most famous example of this trend in American oratorical practice. In the years immediately preceding the American Civil War, multifaceted debates over the rights and responsibilities of individual states were distilled into a bipolar struggle over the emancipation of the slaves.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Time*, 4 July 2005, p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> *Time*, 4 July 2005, pp. 41-44.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Biesecker, 'Oratory', *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient Times to the Information Age*, eds. Theresa Enos and Stuart Brown (New York: Garland, 1996), p. 486.

Among the most famous of these were the ‘Lincoln-Douglas Debates’, a series of formal political debates in 1858 between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas in a campaign for one of Illinois’ two United States Senate seats. Although Lincoln would ultimately lose the Senate race, the debates had helped him gain the vital support of the newly-formed Republican party, who would make Lincoln its nominee in the 1860 presidential election. More importantly, the debates had showcased Lincoln’s democratic ideals and underscored his commitment to preserving the Union at all cost. He had made forceful points in his easygoing manner and high-pitched Southern Indiana accent, and those on both sides of the secession debate were listening.

Lincoln had been in office only one year when the debates on States’ Rights culminated in the Southern states secession from the Union. The American Civil War broke out in April 1861 and would characterize Lincoln’s presidency. The most famous battle of the war took place at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, from July 1 to July 3, 1863. At the end of the battle, the Union’s Army of the Potomac had successfully repelled the second invasion of the North by the Confederacy’s Army of Northern Virginia. More than 51,000 Confederate and Union soldiers were wounded, missing, or dead, with many of the dead buried in makeshift graves along the battlefield. Pennsylvania Governor Andrew Curtin commissioned attorney David Wills to purchase land for a proper burial site for the deceased Union soldiers. Wills acquired seventeen acres for the cemetery, which was planned and designed by notable landscape architect William Saunders.<sup>14</sup>

The cemetery was dedicated on November 19, 1863. The official, paid speaker for the event was Edward Everett, a congressman and one of the nation’s leading orators. President Lincoln, seemingly as an afterthought, was also invited to speak ‘as Chief Executive of the nation, formally [to] set apart the grounds to their sacred use by a few appropriate remarks’. At the ceremony, Everett spoke for more than two hours, Lincoln for two minutes, and in that brief time he delivered one of the most memorable speeches in United States history.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> ‘Document info’ for ‘Draft of the Gettysburg Address’ at <http://www.ourdocuments.gov> (Accessed 11 August 2007).

<sup>15</sup> ‘Document info’.



President Lincoln had given his brief speech much thought. He found it significant that the Union victory at Gettysburg coincided with the nation's birthday (July 4, Independence Day); but rather than focus on the specific battle in his remarks, he wanted to present a broad statement about the larger significance of the war. The Civil War was unlike any other in American History, and with many of his own relatives and former political colleagues fighting for the Confederacy, Lincoln understood firsthand the painful divisions the war was perpetuating. As Michael Shaara vividly portrays in his Pulitzer prize-winning novel *The Killer Angels*, both North and South believed they were fighting for God and for God's way of life. The objectives of war were not as obviously demarcated as they had been in previous conflicts, where the enemy was clearly identified by a different nationality. In the Civil War, soldiers who had once fought together under the same flag for the United States now found themselves on opposite sides of the battlefield, often with brother fighting brother.

Without a doubt, Lincoln knew his audience. Invoking the *Declaration of Independence* and its principles of liberty and equality, he spoke of 'a new birth of freedom' and continued to reshape the aims of the war for the American people—transforming it from a war for the *Union* to a war for the *nation* and freedom. Although Lincoln himself and others expressed disappointment in the speech initially, it has come to be regarded as one of the most elegant and eloquent speeches in United States history.<sup>16</sup> A rhetorical analysis of the speech reveals why it has so endured.

### *Rhetorical Analysis of 'The Gettysburg Address'*

The version of 'The Gettysburg Address' printed above is the version most historians agree upon as the text Lincoln delivered at the battlefield on November 19, 1863. It is transcribed from Lincoln's handwritten copy and reveals, through its editorial symbols, the great thought Lincoln had given to the task before him. The series of drafts on official Executive Mansion letterhead debunks popular folklore that Lincoln composed the speech on the back of an envelope during the eighty-mile train trip from Washington to Gettysburg, though he could have easily been

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<sup>16</sup> 'Document info'.

excused for doing so, as he was appearing merely as an ‘official’ figurehead at the dedication ceremony, not as the celebrated orator commissioned to deliver the actual Gettysburg Address. Lincoln understood clearly the gravity of the occasion and treated his duty as anything but rote or last minute, as rumours have suggested. In fact, he ignored the warnings of his advisers and set out from Washington a day in advance, anticipating travel delays, since the war had overtaxed railroad facilities.<sup>17</sup> He laboured over his sparse, yet moving, remarks that would be remembered as the genuine ‘Gettysburg Address’, while Edward Everett’s speech, and the man himself, have largely been forgotten by history. In *Lincoln At Gettysburg*, Garry Wills writes that Everett’s oration ‘will live, now, as the foil to that better thing that followed’.<sup>18</sup>

Lincoln’s brief speech endures as much for what it didn’t say as for what it did, demonstrating his brilliant assessment of both the significance of the occasion and the mindset of his audience. What is perhaps most immediately striking in Lincoln’s address is his omission of ‘I’. Lincoln never seeks to call attention to himself or to his own political motivations. Rather, he invokes the words of the United States Constitution (government of the people, by the people, and for the people), allowing those immortal lines to speak for themselves. When he does use the first person, it is in the form of ‘we’, illustrating that he is promoting the shared values of the entire nation—not specifically the ‘Union’ or ‘Confederacy’. Lincoln’s use of the word ‘nation’ is significant, for, in using it, he avoids acknowledging the division of ‘North’ and ‘South’, ‘Union’ and ‘Confederacy’, and instead hearkens back to the birth of the *nation* (four score and seven years ago—1776) and its founding principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. Though the cemetery was intended to commemorate *Union* dead, Lincoln never designates Gettysburg as a ‘Union’ cemetery. Rather, he refers collectively to ‘all the brave men, living and dead’, acknowledging the *nation*’s loss.

In keeping with Romantic Transcendentalism, the predominant literary theory of his time, Lincoln *transcended* the present moment,

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Berns, ‘In 272 Words’ [Review of Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America*], *Commentary*, Volume 94, Issue 5 (November 1992), p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), p. 211.

looking beyond the bloodshed and division, to a time when the nation would put aside its differences and once again become the *United States* of America. He looked into the future and to how the world would remember the sacrifice of so many lives:

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow, this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have hallowed it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here; while it can never forget what they *did* here.<sup>19</sup>

Using the rhetorical devices of anaphora, rhyme, alliteration and assonance (we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow), Lincoln prefaces one of the most analysed lines of the speech: ‘The brave men, living and dead, who *struggled* here . . . .’ Lincoln’s choice of the word ‘struggled’ is significant. Rather than using militant terms such as ‘fought’, ‘battled’, or ‘warred’, he chose a verb that could apply to the entire history of the United States as a young *nation*. With one word, he encapsulated the meaning of the American Revolution, the nation’s *struggle* for independence; the conditions that precipitated the Emancipation Proclamation, the *struggle* for equality; and the implications of the present conflict, the *struggle* not only of civil war, but of restoring the *nation*.

The irony of the passage is obvious. The world would indeed remember Lincoln’s words and their power not only to consecrate the Gettysburg battlefield, but also, in the words of Garry Wills, to ‘remake America’.

Everett wrote to Lincoln the next day, expressing his appreciation for the President’s brief, but moving, speech: ‘I should be glad, if I could flatter myself, that I came as near the central idea of the occasion in two hours, as you did in two minutes’. Everett had used his two hour speech to rehearse the history of those who fought the battles of Gettysburg, comparing them with noble warriors of Ancient history; to recount the actual warfare in grisly detail; and, finally, to castigate the Confederacy, thereby perpetuating the divisional lines of the Civil War. Lincoln, in his short oration, focused

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<sup>19</sup> ‘Draft of the Gettysburg Address’ (emphasis added).

not upon what had happened at Gettysburg, but upon where the nation should go from there. Nor did he dwell upon the Union victory at Gettysburg, the battle being the turning point in the war, or even upon the issues of war itself, which had torn the nation asunder. Rather, he sought to set aside the differences and focus upon the larger issue at hand: restoring the nation.

Oddly enough, Lincoln's was the role of 'formality' and Everett's of 'commemoration for posterity', yet the two men, by their words, inadvertently switched roles. Everett, in the third line of his speech, uses 'I', calling attention to himself as one of the most acclaimed orators of the day and mentioning specifically 'the duty he must perform'. He refers throughout the speech to the 'Union' specifically, whereas Lincoln used the term *nation*, in hopes that the 'Confederate States of America' and the 'Union' would someday once again form the *United States*, one *nation* under God. Everett makes his own attempt at transcendentalism in the final line of his speech: 'In the glorious annals of our common country there will be no brighter page than that which relates THE BATTLES OF GETTYSBURG'. Compare this to the final line of Lincoln's speech: 'that we here highly resolve these dead shall not have died in vain; that the nation shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people by the people for the people, shall not perish from the earth'.

While Everett focuses on the specifics of death, war and the dedication of the cemetery, predicting 'no brighter page' in history than those relating the battles of Gettysburg, Lincoln uses the rhetorical device of antithesis (these *dead* shall not have *died* in vain . . . new *birth* of freedom) to focus upon life and regeneration. Moreover, Lincoln's choice of the words *not perish* ('shall not perish from the earth') are noteworthy. The occasion commemorates those who perished on the battlefield, yet Lincoln's words evoke images of everlasting liberty and freedom. Everett's choice of the word 'brighter' in relation to Gettysburg was as short-sighted as Lincoln's use of 'struggled' was ingenious. Whereas Lincoln was concerned with the future, Everett dwelled on the past.

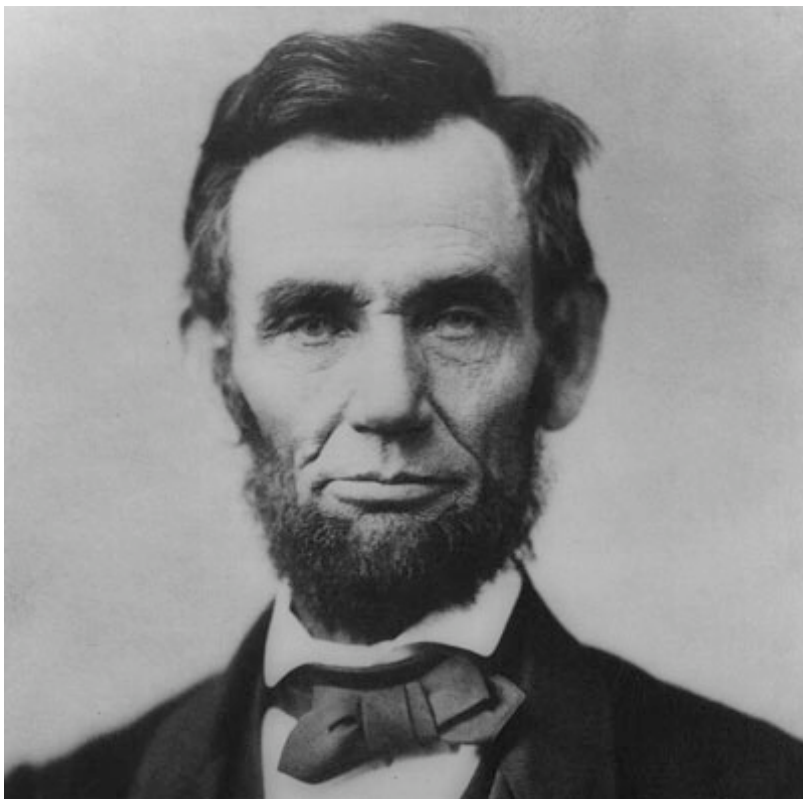
In contrast to Everett, whose style conformed to the conventions of the day—elevated diction and self-consciously artful expression—Lincoln's insistence on direct and forthright language seemed odd or peculiar. However, Lincoln had but one goal on his mind, as he had earlier expressed

in a letter to Horace Greeley, founder and editor of the *New York Tribune*, an antislavery paper:

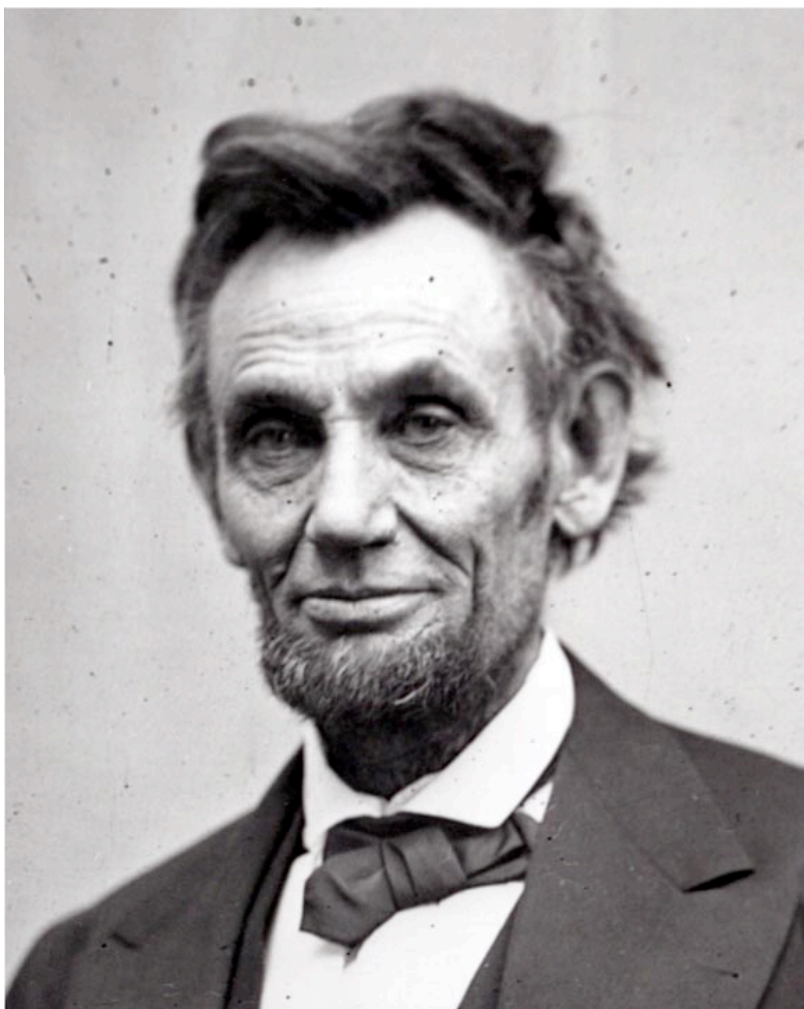
‘My paramount objective in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that’.

Obviously, Lincoln wasted no time on pretence.

While Everett repeats the words ‘you feel’ three times in the introduction to his lengthy speech, in an attempt to identify with the audience, Lincoln relies upon his words and the images they created to evoke pathos, leaving the audience to draw its own conclusions. This consideration of the audience best demonstrates Lincoln’s seemingly prescient adherence to epistemic rhetoric and its chief tenet that rhetoric exists not merely so that truth may be communicated, but that truth may be discovered. The Gettysburg Address has been called a sleight of hand on the grandest scale, but Lincoln’s words were born of wisdom, not deception. As President, he knew better than anyone how the nation felt, having led it through two years of the bloodiest war on American soil. Historians and biographers alike have commented on the severity of the ageing process, apparent in Lincoln’s official portraits between his taking office in 1860 and the end of the Civil War in 1865. The lines of the story, some have said, are etched in his face:



**Lincoln 1861**



**Lincoln 1865**

Barack Obama, who currently holds the US Senate seat that Lincoln once contested and lost, writes of the latter portrait:

In it, his face is as finely lined as a pressed flower. He appears frail, almost broken; his eyes, averted from the camera's lens, seem to contain a heartbreaking melancholy, as if he sees before him what the nation had so recently endured. It would be a sorrowful picture except for the fact that Lincoln's mouth is turned ever so slightly into a smile. The smile doesn't negate the sorrow. But it alters tragedy into grace.<sup>20</sup>

White House documents and Lincoln's personal papers reveal the astonishing extent to which the President internalised the sorrows and burdens of war. One year and two days after his speech at Gettysburg, Lincoln would write another landmark document, a letter to the grieving mother of five sons in the Union army, killed on the battlefield:

To Mrs Lydia Bixby

Executive Mansion  
Washington, Nov. 21, 1864

Dear Madam—I have been shown, in the files of the War Department, a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle.

I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which shall attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save.

I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

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<sup>20</sup> *Time*, 4 July 2005, p. 56



Yours very sincerely and respectfully, A. LINCOLN.<sup>21</sup>

The ‘Bixby Letter’ has been quoted or referred to in several feature films on war, most recently in a voice-over in Steven Spielberg’s 1998 World War II epic, *Saving Private Ryan*.

Often heralded as the greatest and wisest President in United States history, Lincoln is also considered the finest orator—not surprisingly, as he seemed to embody simultaneously the rhetorical theories of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. Lincoln was, clearly, not only skilled in speaking, but also a good man, fitting Quintilian’s description of the ideal orator. Lincoln believed, like Aristotle, that the determining motive of human life and political existence is man’s desire for happiness, and it is precisely this desire that is the object of Lincoln’s persuasive discourse. Cicero’s *De oratore*, portraying the active and compelling statesman rescuing Rome from demagoguery and chaos, could well be a portrait of Lincoln, liberating the United States from the divisions of war.

Walter Berns, in his review of *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, writes:

[The Gettysburg Address] is the greatest American speech, and Lincoln was [America’s] greatest speechmaker; Wills succeeds in confirming our judgment of that. Without intending to do so, however, he also confirms our judgment that Lincoln was our greatest Statesman.

An Englishman, Lord Charnwood, was the first to recognise this. ‘Many great deeds had been done in the war’, he wrote in his magnificent memoir of Lincoln, but the greatest by far were those done by Lincoln. He made it possible for the Union to be preserved (and as Charnwood rightly said, ‘nobody else could have done it’); he also made it possible for us to see that it was worth preserving. He did this with his words, especially those at Gettysburg.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Abraham Lincoln, ‘To Mrs Lydia Bixby’, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, Volume 8 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), p.116-117. Available via <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/>.

<sup>22</sup> Berns, ‘In 272 Words’, pp. 56-57.

Abraham Lincoln's ambition was never simply for office or power, but rather to accomplish something worthy that would stand the test of time, that would allow his story to be told after he died. 'Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition', he told the voters of Sangamon County when he announced his candidacy for the Illinois state legislature at the age of 23. 'I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed by my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem'. He acknowledged that he was 'young and unknown to many', that he had been born in humble circumstances and had 'no wealthy or popular relations' to stand up for him, but he promised that if elected, he would be 'unremitting' in his efforts 'to compensate'. Should he lose, he confessed, he had 'been too familiar with disappointments to be very much chagrined'.<sup>23</sup> On that particular occasion, Lincoln was defeated, but the rest, as they say, is history.

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<sup>23</sup> *Time*, 4 July 2005, p. 44.